

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT  
WESTERN DISTRICT OF WASHINGTON AT TACOMA

RAPHAEL NOEL ETIENNE,

Petitioner,

v.

BEATRIZ VILLARREAL ZUNIGA,

Respondent.

CASE NO. C10-5061BHS

FINDINGS OF FACT AND  
CONCLUSIONS OF LAW

This matter comes before the Court on Petitioner Raphael Noel Etienne's ("Etienne") petition seeking the return of his two minor children to Mexico pursuant to the 1980 Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction ("Convention"), Oct. 25, 1980, T.I.A.S. No. 11670, S. Treaty Doc. No. 99-11, and its implementing statute, the International Child Abduction Remedies Act ("ICARA"), 42 U.S.C. §§ 11601, *et seq.* Having considered the evidence brought before the Court during a two-day bench trial and the parties' submissions in support of their respective positions, the Court concludes that the petition for return is denied with respect to E.N. Further, the Court concludes that the parties shall, on or before June 15, 2010, notify the Court with the name of a child psychologist, or similar professional, qualified to interview B.N. consistent with the Court's instructions below. In support of these conclusions, the Court makes the following findings of fact and conclusions of law:

## **I. FINDINGS OF FACT AND DISCUSSION**

## A. Background

Etienne and Respondent Beatriz Villarreal Zuniga (“Villarreal”) were married on July 29, 1994. Exh. 3. They have one daughter, “E.N.” who was born –/–/1995 (Exh. 4), and one son, “B.N.” who was born –/–/2002 (Exh. 5). Etienne, Villarreal, and the children are all citizens of Mexico.

Both of the children were born in Mexico and lived there until July of 2008. See Exhs. 4 & 5; Tr. 192-93. Beginning with kindergarten, E.N. and B.N. were enrolled at a private school in Mexico City. Tr. 42; 124. Both children did well in school. Exhs. 18 & 19. Both children had lots of friends, were involved in many extra-curricular activities, and lived in very close proximity to more than twelve members of Villarreal's extended family. Tr. 65-67; 69-70; 185-86.

Etienne and Villarreal were both involved in raising their children while they lived in Mexico. Tr. 34; 191. Both parents were responsible for cooking meals for the children, shopping for groceries and other household items, driving the children to school, and generally spending time with the children. Tr. 34; 59; 60; 191. Both parents were also financially responsible for the children. Tr. 37; 254-55. There was conflicting testimony and evidence regarding the status of tuition that was supposedly paid to the children's school for the 2007-2008 school year. Tr. 42-43; 160-61; 225-26; Exhs. A-7 & A-8. Regardless of when or even whether that tuition was paid, the Court finds that both parents contributed to the financial needs of the children. *See* Tr. 37-38; 254-55; Exhs. 25, 56, 57.

Etienne, Villarreal and the children took vacations together as a family while they were living in Mexico. Tr. 48-49; 256. Villarreal and the children also took several vacations by themselves to see her family in Washington prior to 2008. Tr. 192-93.

Although Etienne testified that he and Villarreal had never separated while in Mexico and that the family remained living together until on or about July 4, 2008 (Tr. 116-17), the Court does not find this testimony credible. First, this testimony conflicted

1 with Etienne's earlier statements that his children's school forms needed both his and  
2 Villarreal's signatures because "according to the rules of the school . . . if the parents are  
3 divorced or separated, they have to know so they can't accept only one signature." Tr.  
4 51; 167-69. Further, according to Villarreal, she and Etienne began living separately for  
5 the final time in early June of 2007 and remained in separate residences until she and the  
6 children left for the United States on July 4, 2008. Tr. 252; 284-85; 300. E.N. also  
7 testified that her parents were separated for approximately a year and a half before she  
8 left Mexico in July of 2008. Tr. 229; *see* Tr. 191 & 237 (E.N. referring to times when her  
9 parents were "still together" and "separated"). The Court finds Villarreal's and E.N.'s  
10 testimony credible and finds that Etienne and Villarreal were living separately from early  
11 June of 2007 until Villarreal and the children left Mexico in July of 2008. Further, the  
12 Court finds that Etienne was not truthful in his testimony regarding his relationship with  
13 Villarreal in general. Both Villarreal and E.N. testified about several incidents involving  
14 Etienne's physical abuse of Villarreal. Tr. 226-231; 274-80; 282-87. Based on this  
15 testimony and the other evidence admitted at trial, the Court finds that Etienne did in fact  
16 physically abuse Villarreal.

17 **B. Removal from Mexico**

18 On or about July 4, 2008, Villarreal and the children left Mexico for a vacation in  
19 Washington. Tr. 180; 288. They entered the United States on tourist visas. Tr. 193; 288-  
20 89. In August of 2008, Villarreal and Etienne agreed that she would remain in the United  
21 States with the children for approximately six more months so that the children could  
22 study English. Tr. 119; 294-95. During the summer of 2008, Villarreal enrolled the  
23 children in public school in Washington. Tr. 256.

24 In November of 2008 Etienne began sending money to Villarreal to purchase  
25 airline tickets back to Mexico. Tr. 122. Etienne contacted the children's school in  
26 Mexico to make sure that the children could return in January instead of December. Tr.  
27 124. Etienne was under the assumption that the children would be back in Mexico by the  
28

1 end of January 2009 to attend school. Tr. 123-24. In January of 2009 the children were  
2 still enrolled in their school in Washington. Tr. 258.

3 Villarreal did not return to Mexico in January of 2009. Tr. 122-123. There was  
4 conflicting testimony concerning the date of the conversation between Villarreal and  
5 Etienne when she told him that she and the children were not going to return to Mexico.  
6 Tr. 122-23; 295-96. Because the only evidence of when this conversation took place is  
7 that of Etienne's and Villarreal's, and the Court finds in general that Villarreal is a more  
8 credible witness, it concludes that this conversation took place sometime in January.

9 In May of 2009 Etienne filed an application for the return of his children under the  
10 Convention with the Mexican Central Authority. Tr. 125-27; Exh. 1. The application  
11 was processed by the Mexican Secretariat of Foreign Relations and the U.S. State  
12 Department. Accordingly, the U.S. State Department located counsel for Etienne to  
13 represent him in these proceedings. On January 29, 2010, Etienne filed his petition under  
14 the Convention for the return of his children in this Court. Dkt. 1.

15 **C. Children's Life in the United States**

16 When Villarreal and the children arrived in Washington in July of 2008, they lived  
17 with Villarreal's uncle, Filiberto Zuniga ("Filiberto"). Tr. 194; 260-61. Villarreal and  
18 Filiberto had disagreements while she and her children were living with him. Tr. 261-63.  
19 On the evening of Thanksgiving day in 2008, Villarreal and the children came back to  
20 Filiberto's home and the family would not open the door for them. Tr. 260-61. Villarreal  
21 and the children spent that night in a hotel. Tr. 195-96. The next day, they moved into a  
22 house. Tr. 196-97. Approximately two weeks later, Villarreal and her children moved  
23 into an apartment in Tacoma, Washington. Tr. 197-98; 290-91. Approximately six  
24 months later, Villarreal and her children moved into the apartment in Lakewood,  
25 Washington, where they now reside. Tr. 198-99; 291.

26 E.N. is currently a freshman in high school in Lakewood, Washington. Exh. A-6.  
27 She enjoys school, is doing well academically in many of her classes, and has many  
28 friends. Tr. 217-18; Exh. A-6. E.N. speaks, reads, and writes in English and wants to

1 learn French. Tr. 218; 233; 236. She is having a hard time with her algebra class and has  
2 sought after-school tutoring from her teacher to improve in that subject. Tr. 218-19. She  
3 is actively involved in the church she attends with Villarreal and B.N. Tr. 219-20. She  
4 sings in the church choir and volunteers with the youth group. Tr. 220; 243-44. E.N.  
5 does not want to be returned to Mexico. Tr. 233-37. She prefers to stay in the United  
6 States and live with Villarreal. *Id.*

7 B.N. is currently in the second grade at a public elementary school in Lakewood,  
8 Washington. Exh. A-5. He is doing well academically in school and has many friends.  
9 Tr. 263-64; Exh. A-5. He enjoys school, playing with his friends that live near his  
10 apartment, and playing video games. Tr. 264-65. B.N. also very much enjoys going to  
11 church and is active with the church's children's group. Tr. 244; 264-65.

12 Villarreal has held several part-time jobs since she and the children have lived in  
13 Washington. Tr. 292-93. She is not currently receiving any public assistance from  
14 Washington, with the exception of medical coupons. Tr. 294. She currently earns money  
15 by selling jewelry at a swap meet. Tr. 292-93. Villarreal has a petition for asylum  
16 pending with the United States Department of Homeland Security and has applied for  
17 employment authorization from U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services that, at the  
18 time of trial, was still pending approval. Tr. 270-71; Exh. A-9. At the time of trial,  
19 Villarreal had received an offer of employment with an insurance company pending the  
20 approval of her application for work authorization. Tr. 271-72; Exh. A-10.

21 **D. Discussion**

22 **1. Legal Framework**

23 The purpose of the Convention, as explained in its preamble, is to "protect children  
24 internationally from the harmful effects of their wrongful removal or retention and to  
25 establish procedures to ensure their prompt return to the State of their habitual residence."  
26 Convention, T.I.A.S. No. 11670. This may occur either through the removal of a child  
27 from its "habitual environment" or "a refusal to restore a child to its own environment  
28 after a stay abroad." Elisa Perez-Vera, Explanatory Report ¶ 12, in 3 Hague Conference

1 on Private International Law, Acts and Documents of the Fourteenth Session, Child  
2 Abduction 426 (1982) (“Perez-Vera Report”).<sup>1</sup> “The Convention seeks to deter those  
3 who would undertake such abductions by eliminating their primary motivation for doing  
4 so. Since the goal of the abductor generally is ‘to obtain a right of custody from the  
5 authorities of the country to which the child has been taken,’ the signatories to the  
6 Convention have agreed to ‘deprive his actions of any practical or juridical  
7 consequences.’” *Mozes v. Mozes*, 239 F.3d 1067, 1070 (9th Cir. 2001) (quoting Perez-  
8 Vera at ¶¶ 13 & 16). Therefore, once it has been determined that a child who was a  
9 habitual resident of one signatory state is wrongfully removed to, or retained in, another  
10 signatory state, and less than one year has elapsed since the filing of the petition for return  
11 of the child, the Convention requires the court to order the return of the child.  
12 Convention, art. 12. A petitioner must establish by a preponderance of the evidence that  
13 the child has been wrongfully removed, or retained, under the Convention. 42 U.S.C. §  
14 11603(e)(1). However, if more than one year has elapsed since the filing of the petition  
15 for return, the court must return the child “unless it is demonstrated that the child is now  
16 settled in its new environment.” *Id.* Further, a court that finds that a child has been  
17 wrongfully removed, or retained, under the Convention, may refuse to order the child  
18 returned if it finds that the respondent opposing the return has met the requisite burden of  
19 proof in establishing that one of the exceptions contained in Articles 12, 13, or 20 of the  
20 Convention applies. 42 U.S.C. § 11603(e)(2).

21       **2. Wrongful Retention**

22           Article 3 of the Convention dictates that retention of a child is considered  
23 “wrongful” where:

24  
25  
26           <sup>1</sup> “Elisa Perez-Vera was the official Hague Conference reporter, and her explanatory  
27 report is recognized by the Conference as the official history and commentary on the Convention  
28 and is a source of background on the meaning of the provisions of the Convention available to  
all States becoming parties to it.” *Mozes v. Mozes*, 239 F.3d 1067, 1069 fn.3 (9th Cir.  
2001)(internal citations and quotation marks omitted).

1                             (a) it is in breach of rights of custody attributed to a person, an  
 2 institution, or any other body, either jointly or alone, under the law of the  
 3 State in which the child was habitually resident immediately before the  
 4 removal or retention; and

5                             (b) at the time or removal or retention those rights were actually  
 6 exercised, either jointly or alone, or would have been so exercised but for  
 7 the removal or retention.

8 The Ninth Circuit, in *Mozes*, established a four-part test for a court to use when applying  
 9 this Article 3 provision of the Convention:

10                             (1) When did the removal or retention at issue take place? (2) Immediately  
 11 prior to the removal or retention, in which state was the child habitually  
 12 resident? (3) Did the removal or retention breach the rights of custody  
 13 attributed to the petitioner under the law of the habitual residence? (4) Was  
 14 the petitioner exercising those rights at the time of the removal or retention?

15 239 F.3d at 1070.

16                             Here, in answer to the first question, the Court has found that retention of the  
 17 children took place in January of 2009. *See infra* Section I.D.3. Next, the Court must  
 18 decide in which state, immediately prior to the retention of the children, E.N. and B.N.  
 19 were habitually resident. *Mozes*, 239 F.3d at 1070. Etienne, in his closing argument  
 20 brief, asserts that the parties are in agreement that the children's habitual place of  
 21 residence prior to their *removal* was Mexico. Dkt. 60 at 5 & fn.2. Etienne is correct that  
 22 Villarreal does not dispute that E.N. and B.N. were habitually resident in Mexico prior to  
 23 July of 2008. However, the relevant question in this case is where the children were  
 24 habitually resident prior to their *retention* in early 2009. *Id.* at 1070. Etienne argues, for  
 25 purposes of whether his petition was filed within one year of the wrongful removal or  
 26 retention, that the children were wrongfully retained in February of 2009. Thus, Etienne  
 27 may not then argue that, for purposes of habitual residence, the Court look to the  
 28 "removal" of the children in July of 2008 as it is undisputed that such removal occurred  
 with Etienne's permission and therefore was not "wrongful" under the Convention.

29                             Accordingly, the Court will consider whether E.N. and B.N. were habitually  
 30 resident in the United States prior to their retention. In *Mozes*, the Ninth Circuit  
 31 addressed at length the issue of how a court should determine the habitual residence of  
 32 children under the Convention. 239 F.3d at 1071-84. First, the Court must look at the

1 settled intention of the person to abandon the habitual residence left behind. *Id.* at 1075.  
2 This intention need not be present “at the moment of departure; it could coalesce during  
3 the course of a stay abroad originally intended to be temporary. Nor need the intention be  
4 expressly declared, if it is manifest from one’s actions.” *Id.* Whether or not there is a  
5 settled intention to abandon a prior habitual residence is a question of fact. *Id.*

6 The question arises, then, “[w]hose settled intention determines whether a *child*  
7 has abandoned a prior habitual residence?” *Id.* at 1076 (emphasis in original). While a  
8 court may be inclined to conclude that it is, of course, the child’s intention that applies,  
9 there is an obvious problem with such a conclusion. *Id.* “Children, particularly the ones  
10 whose return may be ordered under the Convention [those under the age of 16], normally  
11 lack the material and psychological wherewithal to decide where they will reside.” *Id.*  
12 (footnote omitted). Therefore, in cases where it is necessary to decide whether the stay in  
13 a foreign state was intended to be temporary and short-term, the intention that applies is  
14 that of the “person or persons entitled to fix the place of the child’s residence.” *Id.*  
15 (internal quotation marks omitted). However, difficulty arises “when the persons entitled  
16 to fix the child’s residence no longer agree on where it has been fixed.” *Id.* “In these  
17 cases, the representations of the parties cannot be accepted at face value, and courts must  
18 determine from all available evidence whether the parent petitioning for return of a child  
19 has already agreed to the child’s taking up habitual residence where it is.” *Id.* In *Mozes*,  
20 the Ninth Circuit divided into three broad categories the factual scenarios in which this  
21 question arises. *Id.*

22 The first category, at one end of the spectrum, are those cases where the family, as  
23 a whole, has demonstrated a settled intent to change habitual residences even though one  
24 parent may have been reluctant in making such a change. *Id.* at 1076-77. This category  
25 is inapplicable to the instant case as Etienne and Villarreal did not manifest any intent for  
26 the family, as a unit, to become habitually resident in the United States.

27 The second category, at the other end of the spectrum, are cases where the initial  
28 relocation of the child “was clearly intended to be of a specific, delimited period. In these

1 cases, courts have generally refused to find that the changed intentions of one parent led  
2 to an alteration in the child's habitual residence." *Id.* at 1077.

3 The third category includes the "in-between" cases

4 where the petitioning parent had earlier consented to let the child stay  
5 abroad from some period of ambiguous duration. Sometimes the  
6 circumstances surrounding the child's stay are such that, despite the lack of  
7 perfect consensus, the court finds the parents to have shared a settled  
8 mutual intent that the stay last indefinitely. When this is the case, we can  
9 reasonably infer a mutual abandonment of the child's prior habitual  
10 residence. Other times, however, circumstances are such that, even though  
11 the exact length of the stay was left open to negotiation, the court is able to  
12 find no settled mutual intent from which such abandonment can be inferred.

13 *Id.*

14 Here, Etienne would argue that the instant case fits in the second category, as E.N.  
15 and B.N.'s stay in Washington was "clearly intended" to be for a "specific, delimited  
16 period" of six months. *Id.* In the alternative, in the event the Court concludes that this  
17 case fits in the third category, Etienne would argue that the circumstances surrounding  
18 E.N. and B.N.'s stay in Washington are such that the Court cannot infer a settled mutual  
19 intent for the children to abandon their habitual residence of Mexico.

20 Villarreal's position would be that this case fits in the third category as one where,  
21 "despite the lack of perfect consensus," the Court should find that she and Etienne had a  
22 shared mutual intent for the children to remain in Washington indefinitely. *Id.*  
23 Accordingly, the Court should find a mutual abandonment of E.N. and B.N.'s prior  
24 habitual residence of Mexico.

25 The Court concludes that the instant case fits into the second category as the  
26 evidence shows that Villarreal and Etienne clearly intended for the children to be in  
27 Washington for a fixed period of six months. Although Villarreal changed her mind at  
28 some point that she and the children would remain in the United States indefinitely, or  
may have even had the intent never to return when she left Mexico in July of 2008, the  
Court's focus is on the mutual intentions of the parents. *Id.* at 1077. The fact that  
Villarreal alone intended to alter E.N. and B.N.'s habitual residence is insufficient for the

1 Court to find that it has in fact changed. *Id.* Therefore, the Court concludes that E.N. and  
 2 B.N. were habitually resident in Mexico prior to the retention.

3 The third question for the Court, in deciding whether the retention was wrongful,  
 4 is whether the retention was a breach of Etienne's custody rights attributed under the law  
 5 of the habitual residence, which in this case is Mexico. *Mozes*, 239 F.3d at 1070. At trial,  
 6 Etienne called an expert witness, David Lopez ("Lopez"), to testify about Mexican law  
 7 and the Mexican legal system as they relate to family issues. Tr. 77-78; 84-85. The  
 8 Court found that Lopez qualified as an expert witness on these subjects. Tr. 78. Lopez  
 9 testified that, under Article 412 of the Mexican Civil Code, "unemancipated minors . . .  
 10 are under the authority of their parents"; that under Articles 413 and 414, "parents have  
 11 rights to exercise authority over their children"; and that, under Article 416, "even if  
 12 parents are separated, both parents retain the right to custody of the minors." Tr. 84-85.  
 13 Thus, in Lopez's expert opinion, he testified that Articles 412, 413, 414, and 416 of the  
 14 Mexican Civil Code expressly confer rights upon both Etienne and Villarreal. Tr. 85.  
 15 Further, he testified that "[w]hen the children are taken out of Mexico or out of the  
 16 control and possession of one parent, and that parent is deprived of the right to exercise  
 17 the right given under the code of custody, then that would seem to be a violation of that  
 18 right, which indisputably is conferred by Mexican law." *Id.* Villarreal did not present  
 19 evidence to dispute that, under Mexican law, Etienne retained custody rights following  
 20 the retention of the children in Washington. Accordingly, the Court concludes that under  
 21 Mexican law, Etienne's custody rights were breached when Villarreal retained E.N. and  
 22 B.N. in Washington.

23 The fourth question for the Court to address is whether Etienne was actually  
 24 exercising his custody rights at the time of the retention. 239 F.3d at 1070. Etienne, in  
 25 addressing this issue in his closing argument brief, focuses on the incorrect time period in  
 26 that he argues he was exercising his custody rights prior to the children's removal from  
 27 Mexico in July of 2008. As the Court discussed above, the focus of the Court's analysis  
 28

1 is the time period preceding the alleged wrongful *retention* in early 2009, not the  
2 permissive removal in July of 2008.

3       Very recently, the Supreme Court issued on opinion affirming a broad  
4 interpretation of the exercise of custody rights under the Convention. *Abbott v. Abbott*,  
5 No. 08-645, slip. op. at 6 (U.S. Dec. May 17, 2010) (establishing that a *ne exeat* right, that  
6 is, the joint right to determine a child's country of residence, constitutes a right of custody  
7 under the Convention). Article 3 of the Convention recognizes that custody rights can be  
8 decreed jointly or alone. Article 5 states that, for purposes of the Convention, “‘rights of  
9 custody’ shall include rights relating to the care of the person of the child and, in  
10 particular, the right to determine the child’s place of residence.” The Convention defines  
11 “‘rights of access’ [to] include the right to take a child for a limited period of time to a  
12 place other than the child’s habitual residence.” Convention, art. 5. In order for a court  
13 to grant a petition for the return of a child under the Convention, a petitioner must  
14 establish that he was exercising custody rights, not merely rights of access. *Abbott*, slip.  
15 op. at 9-10; Convention, art. 21.

16       Lopez testified that, under Mexican law, Etienne did not lose his custody rights  
17 when the children left Mexico or when they were retained in the United States. Tr. 84-85.  
18 Further, Etienne has provided evidence that he was actually exercising these custody  
19 rights at the time of the retention. The evidence showed that Etienne had regular contact  
20 with his children from the time they left Mexico in July of 2008 until approximately  
21 December of 2008. This contact was in line with what would be expected between a  
22 father and his children where he had agreed that they would live temporarily in another  
23 country to learn the language and he expected them to return within six months. In early  
24 2009, after Etienne learned that Villarreal was retaining the children in Washington  
25 indefinitely, he began pursuing remedies to have his children returned to Mexico. Based  
26 on the evidence presented at trial, the Court concludes that Etienne was exercising his  
27 custody rights at the time of the retention. Accordingly, the Court concludes that

1 Villarreal's retention of E.N. and B.N. in the United States was wrongful under the  
 2 Convention.

3       **3. Affirmative Defenses to Return**

4           **a. Mature Child's Objection**

5       Under the Convention, once a court has concluded that a child has been wrongfully  
 6 retained, it must return the child unless the respondent opposing removal has established  
 7 that one of the affirmative defenses applies. Convention, art. 12; 42 U.S.C. §  
 8 11603(e)(2). One of these affirmative defenses is a mature child's objection to being  
 9 returned to its habitual residence. Convention, art. 13. Specifically, Article 13 of the  
 10 Convention states that a court may "refuse to order the return of the child if it finds that  
 11 the child objects to being returned and has attained an age and degree of maturity at  
 12 which it is appropriate to take account of its views." This affirmative defense is "a  
 13 *separate* ground for repatriation and [under Article 13], a court may refuse repatriation  
 14 *solely* on the basis of a considered objection to returning by a sufficiently mature child."  
 15 *Blondin v. Dubois*, 238 F.3d 153, 166 (2d Cir. 2001); *see Perez-Vera Report at ¶ 30*  
 16 (stating that "the Convention also provides that the child's views concerning the essential  
 17 question for its return or retention may be *conclusive*, provided it has, according to the  
 18 competent authorities, attained an age and degree of maturity sufficient for its views to be  
 19 taken into account" (emphasis added)). A child's maturity must be established by a  
 20 preponderance of the evidence. 42 U.S.C. § 11603(2).

21       The Court, along with counsel for the parties, interviewed E.N. in chambers  
 22 without the robe and other formalities of the courtroom. Tr. 182-237. During, the  
 23 interview, E.N. displayed a thorough understanding of the purpose of the interview and  
 24 the Court's proceedings in general that involve her parents. *Id.* E.N. was articulate and  
 25 specific in her answers to counsel and the Court's questions. *Id.* She asked for  
 26 clarification when she did not understand a question and added specificity to her answers  
 27 when asked to do so. *Id.* E.N. discussed at length her life in Mexico and her life in the  
 28 United States with respect to her friends, school, church, and family. *Id.* E.N. was clear

1 in her preference for remaining in the United States and in her objection to being returned  
 2 to Mexico. Tr. 231-32; 235.

3 Here, the Court concludes that Villarreal has established by a preponderance of the  
 4 evidence that E.N. is of a sufficient age and degree of maturity to have her views taken  
 5 into account. E.N. is fourteen years old and will turn fifteen in the summer of 2010. Tr.  
 6 184-85; Exh. 4. If E.N. were sixteen years old, the Convention would cease to apply  
 7 altogether. Convention, art. 4. Moreover, the Perez-Vera Report, in discussing the  
 8 mature child exception, states that “such a provision is absolutely necessary given the fact  
 9 that the Convention applies, *ratione personae*, to all children under the age of sixteen; the  
 10 fact must be acknowledged that it would be very difficult to accept that a child of, for  
 11 example, fifteen years of age, should be returned against its will.” *Id.* at ¶ 30. Indeed, the  
 12 Court finds that the purpose and intent of the Convention’s mature child exception would  
 13 be contravened if the Court were to return E.N. against her will. *See id.* Therefore, the  
 14 Court concludes that Etienne’s petition with respect to E.N. is denied based on her  
 15 objections to return.

16 The Court also interviewed B.N. in chambers without the presence of the parties’  
 17 counsel. Tr. 303-306. B.N. was clear in his preference for remaining in the United States  
 18 and in his objection to being returned to Mexico. Tr. 304-05. Although the Court  
 19 concludes that eight-year-old B.N. is not of sufficient age and maturity to rely solely on  
 20 his views in denying his return under the mature child exception, the Court will consider  
 21 B.N.’s testimony in analyzing the well-settled defense below. *See Anderson v. Acree*, 250  
 22 F. Supp. 2d 876, 883 (S.D. Ohio 2002).

23                   **b. Well-settled Defense**

24                   **(i) Timeliness of Petition**

25 Article 12 of the Convention states that “where the proceedings have been  
 26 commenced after the expiration of the period of one year” from the date of the wrongful  
 27 retention, the court “shall also order the return of the child, unless it is demonstrated that  
 28 the child is now settled in its new environment.” Thus, the Court must first decide when

1 the proceedings commenced and second, whether such commencement occurred within  
2 one year from the date of the wrongful retention.

3 ICARA states that proceedings commence in a civil action, for purposes of Article  
4 12, when a party files a “petition for the relief sought in any court which has jurisdiction  
5 of such action and which is authorized to exercise its jurisdiction in the place where the  
6 child is located at the time the petition is filed.” 42 U.S.C. § 11603(b). Federal courts  
7 have concurrent jurisdiction with state courts over petitions for the return of children  
8 brought under the Convention. § 11603(a). Further, E.N. and B.N. are located in Pierce  
9 County, a place over which this Court is authorized to exercise its jurisdiction.

10 Accordingly, the commencement of proceedings in the instant case occurred on January  
11 29, 2010, when Etienne filed his petition for return of the children in this Court. Dkt. 1.

12 Next, the Court must address whether Etienne’s petition was filed within one year  
13 of the wrongful retention of the children. Convention, art. 12. The testimony given at  
14 trial on this issue was conflicting. Etienne, on direct and cross-examination, testified that  
15 he and Villarreal had a conversation in February of 2009 in which she told him that she  
16 and the children would not be returning to Mexico. Tr. 122-25; 180. Villarreal, on cross-  
17 examination, testified that the conversation in which she told Etienne that she and the  
18 children were not going to return to Mexico took place in January of 2009, not in  
19 February. Tr. 295-96. As discussed above, the Court finds that this conversation took  
20 place in January of 2009. *See supra* Section I.B.

21 Etienne argues that he did not know until February of 2009 that Villarreal planned  
22 to remain in the United States with his children and thus, his petition filed in January of  
23 2010 was within one year of the wrongful retention. Villarreal argues that, because the  
24 conversation in which she told Etienne directly that she was not coming back to Mexico  
25 occurred in January, his petition filed January 29, 2010, was not within one year of the  
26 wrongful retention. Further, Villarreal argues that regardless of when that conversation  
27 took place, Etienne was on notice earlier than the end of January 2009 that she and the  
28 children were not returning to Mexico. Thus, according to Villarreal, the wrongful

1 retention occurred in early January when Etienne should have known that they were not  
2 returning.

3 In cases where children have been wrongfully retained, the one-year limitation  
4 contained in Article 12 of the Convention is measured from the date the retention became  
5 wrongful. *See Zucker v. Andrews*, 2 F. Supp. 2d 134 (D. Mass. 1998). Wrongful  
6 retention occurs when the non-custodial parent is on notice that the retaining parent does  
7 not intend to return with the child. *Id.* at 140. This retention may occur before there is a  
8 definitive conversation between the parties about the child's return if the non-custodial  
9 parent knew, or should have known, before the conversation that the child would not be  
10 returning. *Id.*

11 First, the Court finds Villarreal to be a more credible witness in general and  
12 therefore assigns greater weight to her testimony that the definitive conversation  
13 regarding the children's return took place in January of 2009. *See supra* Section I.A-B  
14 (discussing the Court's concern regarding Etienne's credibility as a witness and the  
15 Court's factual finding that this conversation took place in January of 2009). Further, the  
16 Court finds that Etienne was on notice before January 29, 2009, that Villarreal and the  
17 children were not returning to Mexico. Etienne testified on cross-examination that when  
18 the children were not back in Mexico to start school in January he knew something was  
19 wrong. Tr. 159-60. In January of 2009 Etienne was no longer having regular telephone  
20 contact with E.N. and B.N. and the children were still enrolled in school in Washington.  
21 Tr.129; 257-58. Etienne's own testimony indicates that he may have had knowledge as  
22 early as July of 2008 that Villarreal did not plan on returning to Mexico. Tr. 178-79  
23 (Etienne testifying that Villarreal called him from the airport and told him that she was  
24 going to give the children a better life than he could give them); *see Exhs. 7 & 8*  
25 (Etienne's signed applications under the Convention for the return of the children in  
26 which he wrote July 4, 2008, as the date of wrongful removal or retention); *see also* Tr.  
27 157-58 (confirming the date written in the applications ). Taking into account all of the  
28

evidence presented at trial, the Court concludes that Etienne's petition was filed outside the one-year period following the wrongful retention of the children.

## **(ii) Are the Children Well Settled in the United States?**

Because the Court has concluded that Etienne did not file his petition within one year of the wrongful retention of the children, Villarreal is entitled to demonstrate that the children should not be returned because they are now settled in their new environment.

*See Convention, art. 12. The Convention itself does not define what constitutes a child*

being “settled in its new environment.” *Id.* However, the U.S. State Department has

established that "nothing less than substantial evidence of the child's significant

connections to the new country is intended to suffice to meet the respondent's burden of

proof" in asserting the well-settled defense. Public Notice 957, Text & Legal Analysis of

## Hague International Child Abduction Convention, 51 Fed. Reg. 10494, 10509 (U.S. State

Dep't Mar. 26, 1986). Accordingly, the mere passage of time does not establish this

defense. *Anderson*, 250 F. Supp. 2d at 880 (citing *In re Robinson*, 983 F.Supp. 1339,

1345 (D. Colo. 1997)). “Rather, the evidence must show that the child is ‘in fact settle

in or connected to the new environment so that, at least inferentially, return would be

disruptive with likely harmful effects.’’ *Anderson*, 250 F. Supp. 2d at 880-81 (quoting *In*

*re Robinson*, 983 F. Supp. at 1345). Courts analyzing this defense have weighed several

factors in determining whether a child is “settled” for purposes of this defense. *In re*

*DEL C.S.B.*, 559 F.3d 999, 1009 (9th Cir. 2009); *In re Koc*, 181 F. Supp. 2d 136

(S.D.N.Y. 2001); *In re Robinson*, 983 F. Supp. at 1346; Zuker, 2 F. Supp. 2d at 141. In *In*

*In re B. DEL C.S.B.*, the Ninth Circuit adopted a list of six factors it considered in

(1) the child's age; (2) the stability and duration of the child's residence in the new environment; (3) whether the child attends school or day care consistently; (4) whether the child has friends and relatives in the new area; (5) the child's participation in community or extracurricular school activities, such as team sports, youth groups, or school clubs; and (6) the respondent's employment and financial stability.

*Id.* at 1009. In addition to these six factors, the Ninth Circuit decided that, in some cases, a court should consider the immigration status of the child and the respondent. However, the Ninth Circuit in *In re B. DEL C.S.B.* concluded, as a matter of first impression, that lack of lawful immigration status is not determinative of whether a child is “settled” for purposes of Article 12 of the Convention and such status is relevant only where an “immediate, concrete threat of deportation” exists. *Id.* “Although all of these factors, when applicable, may be considered in the ‘settled’ analysis, ordinarily the most important is the length and stability of the child’s residence in the new environment.” *Id.*

The Court finds that there is substantial evidence that B.N. is well-settled in the United States. However, the Court will reserve judgment on this and other defenses, with respect to B.N., as the Court believes it would benefit from the report of a child psychologist, or similar professional, based on his or her interview with B.N. with respect to his life in Mexico, his relationship with his parents, and his life in the United States. Because the Court has concluded that Etienne's petition with respect to E.N. is denied based on her objections to return, the child psychologist's report can be limited to B.N.

## **II. CONCLUSIONS OF LAW**

Based on the findings of fact discussed above, the Court makes the following conclusions of law based on a preponderance of the evidence:

1. Etienne has proven that E.N. and B.N. are under sixteen years of age;
  2. Etienne has proven that prior to retention, E.N. and B.N. were habitual residents of Mexico;
  3. Etienne has proven that the retention was in breach of Etienne's custody rights under Mexican law;
  4. Etienne has proven that he was actually exercising his custody rights at the time of retention;
  5. Etienne has proven that retention of E.N. and B.N. was wrongful under the Convention;

6. Villareal's retention of the children became wrongful, under the Convention, in January of 2009;

7. Villareal has proven that Etienne's petition was not filed within one year of the wrongful retention;

8. Villareal has proven that E.N. is of sufficient age and maturity to have her objections to return taken into account; and

9. Etienne's petition, with respect to E.N., is denied based on her objections to return.

### III. ORDER

Therefore, it is hereby **ORDERED** that Etienne's petition is denied with respect to E.N., and the parties are instructed to, on or before June 15, 2010, locate and notify the Court of a child psychologist, or similar professional, qualified to interview B.N. consistent with the Court's instructions above.

DATED this 2nd day of June, 2010.

  
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**BENJAMIN H. SETTLE**  
United States District Judge